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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 000500

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SUBJECT: LATEST MASSACRE PART OF ON-GOING PARA OFFENSIVE
AGAINST FARC ON CARIBBEAN COAST

11. CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ANNE W. PATTERSON. REASONS:
1.5(C,D).

12. (C) SUMMARY: ON JANUARY 17, SOME 26 RESIDENTS OF A COMMUNITY NEAR THE TOWN OF OVEJAS IN NORTHERN SUCRE DEPARTMENT WERE MASSACRED, APPARENTLY BY PARAMILITARIES BELONGING TO THE NORTHERN BLOCK OF SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS OPERATING ON THE ATLANTIC COAST OF COLOMBIA. A THIRD OF THE COMMUNITY HOUSES WERE BURNED DOWN AND MOST OF ITS RESIDENTS FLED TO OVEJAS. ONE EMBASSY INTERLOCUTOR SAID "THE COMMUNITY IS NOW VIRTUALLY NON-EXISTENT." ACCORDING TO A COLOMBIAN NAVAL INTELLIGENCE CONTACT, THE PARA ATTACK IS PART OF AN ON-GOING CAMPAIGN TO DISLODGE THE FARC 37TH FRONT FROM THE STRATEGIC MONTES DE MARIA MOUNTAIN RANGE AND TO PUSH THE FARC OUT OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC COAST. THE PARA ATTACKS/MASSACRES AGAINST CIVILIAN POPULATIONS ARE LIKELY TO CONTINUE, ESPECIALLY IN SUCRE. THE COLOMBIAN NAVY'S MARINE CORPS HAS LAUNCHED A MAJOR OPERATION TO SURROUND THE AREA OF THE MASSACRE AND TRY TO CAPTURE THE CULPRITS. END SUMMARY.

13. (U) ON JANUARY 17, SOME 26 RESIDENTS OF A SMALL COMMUNITY KNOWN AS CHENGUE NEAR THE TOWN OF OVEJAS IN NORTHERN SUCRE DEPARTMENT WERE MASSACRED, APPARENTLY BY THE CENTAURO (NORTHERN) BLOCK OF SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS OPERATING IN AND AROUND THE ATLANTIC COAST OF COLOMBIA. THE CENTAURO BLOCK IS REPORTEDLY LED BY RODRIGO ANTONIO MERCADO, ALIAS "CADENA," A CLOSE AFFILIATE OF UNITED SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF COLOMBIA (AUC) LEADER CARLOS CASTANO. ON JANUARY 19, CASTANO CONDEMNED THE MASSACRE AND DENIED HIS INVOLVEMENT, BUT ACKNOWLEDGED THAT HIS NORTHERN FRONT HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE AND THAT THEY HAD "GONE OVERBOARD." THE MASSACRE FOLLOWS A STRING OF PARAMILITARY MASSACRES ON/ALONG ATLANTIC COASTAL AREAS DATING BACK TO THE FEBRUARY 16, 1999 MASSACRE OF 28 RESIDENTS OF EL SALADO IN NORTHERN BOLIVAR DEPARTMENT.

14. (C) POLICE AND NAVAL INTELLIGENCE PUBLICLY ATTRIBUTED THE EVER-INCREASING NUMBER OF MASSACRES ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST TO AN ATTEMPT BY THE SELF-DEFENSE FORCES TO: (A) "CLEANSE" THE NORTHERN AREAS OF SUCRE, BOLIVAR, ATLANTICO, MAGDALENA, AND CESAR DEPARTMENTS OF THE FARC, MUCH AS THEY HAVE ALREADY DONE IN CORDOBA DEPARTMENT, (B) CONTROL THE NORTH COAST, INCLUDING THE MORROSQUILLO GULF IN SUCRE AND OTHER KEY SMALL PORTS, TO EXERCISE A MONOPOLY OVER ENTRY OF ARMS AND PRECURSORS AND EXIT OF COCAINE, AND, (C) SPECIFICALLY IN AND AROUND SUCRE AND BOLIVAR DEPARTMENTS, DISLODGE THE FARC'S 35TH AND 37TH FRONTS FROM THE RICH CATTLE AND AGRICULTURAL REGION SURROUNDING THE MONTES DE MARIA.

15. (C) DURING A JANUARY 18 BRIEFING, A HIGH RANKING COLOMBIAN NAVAL INTELLIGENCE CONTACT TOLD POLOFF THAT CHENGUE WAS A MILITARY TARGET FOR THE PARAS BECAUSE IT SERVED AS AN ENTRY POINT INTO THE MONTES DE MARIA, WHERE THE FARC 37TH FRONT OPERATES, AND THAT THE CHENGUE COMMUNITY SERVED AS A RESUPPLY AND R AND R POINT FOR THE GUERRILLAS. THE CHENGUE MASSACRE FITS A PATTERN OF PARA ATTACKS ON SMALL COMMUNITIES ON THE NORTH COAST WHICH, IN THE PARAS' VIEW, SERVE AS CIVILIAN BASES OF SUPPORT FOR

THE FARC 35 AND 37 FRONTS. THE CONTACT DREW PARALLELS BETWEEN CHENGUE AND EL SALADO, AFFIRMING THAT EL SALADO WAS ALSO A FARC STRONGHOLD, AND THAT IT WAS LOCATED ON THE FOOTHILLS OF THE MONTES DE MARIA. HE CONFIDED THAT NAVAL INTELLIGENCE HAD INDICATIONS THAT THE PARAS WOULD ATTACK ANOTHER NEARBY COMMUNITY, AND WERE CAUGHT OFF-GUARD WHEN THE ATTACK TOOK PLACE AT CHENGUE. HE WAS VERY SURPRISED THAT THE PARAS WERE ABLE TO ENTER CHENGUE UNDETECTED SINCE, IN HIS VIEW, THE FARC 37TH FRONT COMPLETELY CONTROLS THE AREA AROUND CHENGUE.

16. (C) THE CONTACT FIRMLY BELIEVES THAT THESE TYPES OF INCIDENTS WILL CONTINUE AS THE PARAS AND FARC FIGHT OVER CONTROL OF THE ATLANTIC COAST, AND ESPECIALLY FOR CONTROL OF THE MONTES DE MARIA. HE ADDED THAT THE PARA NORTH BLOCK IS BEING HEAVILY FINANCED BY CATTLE RANCHERS FROM SUCRE, CORDOBA, AND OTHER ATLANTIC DEPARTMENTS, WHO HAVE BEEN HURT BY FARC KIDNAPPINGS, EXTORTIONS, AND CATTLE RUSTLING. THESE RANCHERS ARE HOPING THE PARAS WILL DRIVE THE FARC OUT OF THEIR AREAS SO THAT THEY TOO CAN HAVE THE "RELATIVE PEACE" THEIR FELLOW RANCHERS ENJOY IN LARGE PARTS OF CORDOBA.

17. (U) COLOMBIAN NATIONAL JUDICIAL POLICE (DIJIN) FIGURES ON MASSACRES DURING 2000, RELEASED ON JANUARY 18, CORROBORATE THE FACT THAT THE ATLANTIC COAST IS SEEING THE LARGEST INCREASE IN PARA KILLINGS IN THE COUNTRY. ACCORDING TO THE FIGURES, AT LEAST HALF OF ALL THE EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS IN 2000 TOOK PLACE IN ATLANTIC COAST DEPARTMENTS. OF ALL COLOMBIAN DEPARTMENTS, BOLIVAR HAD THE LARGEST NUMBER OF PARA MURDERS, WITH 76. SUCRE DEPARTMENT REGISTERED 46 PARA-ATTRIBUTED KILLINGS. ACCORDING TO FIGURES CITED IN A RECENT COLOMBIAN MILITARY BRIEFING TO VISITING DOD OFFICIALS, THERE HAVE BEEN SEVENTEEN MASSACRES THIS YEAR, NOT INCLUDING CHENGUE. OF THESE, TWO HAVE BEEN COMMITTED BY THE FARC, ONE BY THE ELN, TEN BY PARA GROUPS, AND THE REST HAVE NOT YET BEEN ATTRIBUTED.

18. (C) COMMENT: IF STATISTICAL TRENDS AND COLOMBIAN NAVAL INTELLIGENCE ARE CORRECT, PARA MASSACRES OF CIVILIAN POPULATIONS WILL CONTINUE TO OCCUR IN THE ATLANTIC COAST, AND MAY EVEN INTENSIFY AS THE PARA NORTH BLOCK AND THE FARC'S 35 AND 37 BLOCK FIGHT FOR CONTROL OF THE MONTES DE MARIA AND ACCESS TO ATLANTIC PORTS. THE COLOMBIAN NAVY, WHICH HAS SECURITY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THESE AREAS, SEEMS TO HAVE REACTED FAIRLY QUICKLY TO THE MASSACRE, AND HAS DEPLOYED MORE THAN 1,000 MARINES AND SPECIAL FORCES IN PURSUIT OF THE CULPRITS. HOWEVER, AS THE NAVY CONTACT ACKNOWLEDGED, THE PARAS ALSO HAVE A VERY STRONG BASE OF SUPPORT IN THE AREA AND CAN EASILY DISAPPEAR AMONG THE CIVILIAN POPULATION.

PATTERSON

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